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GROWTH IN GRACE

Some people seem to think that it is beneath their dignity to attend to their own spiritual needs. They can work for others, sacrifice for others, pray for others, and, if need be, die for others, but when it comes to thinking about themselves they appear to regard spiritual self-preservation as a culpable form of selfishness.

It is not difficult to discover the origin of this singular perversion of altruism. There have been altogether too many people whose one object of life was to discover means of getting into heaven, and in the search for that blessing they have found no time for treating others as they were trying to treat themselves. Reaction from this sort of egoism accounts for much of the indifference shown by earnest people to their own spiritual advancement. They are ready to go into bankruptcy if the Creditor so decides, but they are not ready to take account of stock of their spiritual assets.



Introspection, we may admit, is not always healthful, but a life without introspection is very likely to go the way of an orchard where no one looks for grubs and parasites. To be sure, one may be so interested in good work as, like Wilberforce, not to have time to consider whether he himself is saved. But such an attitude makes a better epigram than an example. The man who never weighs his motives, never measures his spiritual development, never questions whether his good works are the product of genuine interest in his fellow-men or of membership on social service committees, will be likely to lack intelligent self-estimate. He will always be likely to mistake altruistic restlessness for growth in grace.

Spiritual natures are not developed without heart-searchings. A man may be so devoted to good works as to become an institution rather than a person. He who would be a source of spiritual enthusiasm must be a live coal from the altar of his God, but he should not forget that clinkers sometimes resemble coals.

There is little danger that the modern man of religion shall grow morbid. There is far more danger that he grow externalized. The wealth of opportunity, the drive of organized movements with their paid secretaries, the emphasis upon concrete results, all tend toward efficiency rather than depth of experience. The very closet for prayer has its lists of topics for an entire year's petitions.

Such systematization may be desirable, but a card index will never take the place of a Bible, or a desk telephone the place of meditation.

There is undoubted wisdom in establishing the machinery of a modern city church, but coaching a basket-ball team or organizing men's clubs' "stunts" are not the equivalents of communion with a God who is never in a hurry.

We cannot draw the water of life with a force pump.



Quietude of spirit, a moment's release from the insistent call to efficiency, an emphasis upon personal piety shot through with the joy that can come only from the actual contact of our souls with God, are not enemies of the splendid systematization of energies which marks our modern life. These all must combine. Paul, Augustine, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Bernard, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley show that constructive churchmen have been men of the most mystical intensity of spiritual life. We must be like them. Otherwise efficiency will develop into bureaucracy and the volunteer army of the Lord become a body of spiritual mercenaries with diagrams for banners and a filing system for the sword of the spirit.